

MAISHA RECORD DEPARTMENT • MIHO-SAMA
CENSORED

[REDACTED] was a hero,
And I'll never forget that.
In the end,
she surely overcame herself.

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Nogi Wakaba's Record

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Planning and configuration by Takahiro
Writing by Akashiro Aoi
Illustration by Bunbun
Vertex Design by D.K&JWORKS
Supervision by Project 2H

第十七話

弔花



企画原案・シリーズ構成

タカヒロ (みなとそふと)

執筆 / 朱白あおい

イラスト / BUNBUN

パースデザイン / D.K&JWORKS

監修 / Project 2H

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乃木若葉は
勇者である



Underneath the moonlight-- Hinata walked along the sandy shoal dressed in her miko garb, offering up a ritual prayer.

It was a purification ceremony.

Hinata had again requested to be the one to cleanse Chikage's corpse. And thus, Hinata first had to purify her own body.

Immediately following the report of Chikage's death, Taisha headquarters dispatched Shinto priests to begin the post-mortem procedures. The plan was to cleanse Chikage's body overnight and carry out the funeral service the next morning.

Hinata's voice quivered as she recited the prayer.

(Why... must things be so cruel...?)

Wakaba had told her how Chikage had behaved in the forestized world. But by no means could Chikage's rampage have been of her own volition.

Tamako, Anzu, Chikage.

The lives of three girls had been lost.

Had they lived normal lives, in a normal time--

The boisterous Tamako would be dragging Anzu every which way as Chikage would begrudgingly play along.

All three of them would still be alive.

Meanwhile, Wakaba was in Yuuna's hospital room.

"Gun-chan..."

"..."

Yuuna sat up in bed as she listened to Wakaba's report. Her report of Chikage's death.

Yuuna's head was down, obscuring her face, but her fists were clenched tight.

"I'm getting discharged soon... so I thought we'd be able to hang out again..."

"... I'm sorry..."

Wakaba felt responsible for Chikage's death. This wouldn't have happened had she been more attentive to Chikage's dangerous mental state. This wouldn't have happened had she been strong enough to guarantee Chikage was safe from the Vertexes.

"It's not your fault at all, Wakaba-chan."

Yuuna spoke with a stiff smile, but quickly cast her head down again.

"I'm sorry... Wakaba-chan. But I think... we've had enough for today..."

"... Okay..."

Wakaba stood up and left Yuuna's hospital room.

After she closed the door, Wakaba's back slumped against the wall as she sank to the floor.

She could hear Yuuna sobbing from across the other side.

The hallway of the hospital at night was artificially lit to an almost sterile white brightness.

Wakaba felt as if that all-too-pure whiteness was laughing at them.

"Ghh...!"

Wakaba lacked the motivation to get up, and so she just sat there for an extended period of time.

Early morning the next day, Wakaba was alone in the Marugame Castle classroom.

Classes were canceled that day due to Chikage's funeral, but Wakaba could not break the habit of organizing the blackboard chalk or replacing the water in the vases.

Wakaba had always been the first to get to class. That punctuality garnered Wakaba sparked a competitive spirit in Tamako to be the first one to get to class, but perhaps because she was not a morning person, Tamako could never arrive before Wakaba.

--Wakaba got here first again today, huh. Well, Tama's gonna be first tama-rrow for sure!

Around two months had already passed since Tamako and Anzu had passed away. Yet Wakaba still felt like any minute now, that door would swing wide open, and in would rush Tamako, with Anzu not to far behind.

Just then, the classroom door suddenly opened.

"..."

It was Hinata.

"Oh, Hinata. Good morning."

Wakaba was unsure if her greeting had looked natural.

"Yes... Good morning to you too."

A look of distraught indignation spread on Hinata's face as she spoke. It was rare for her to look that way.



"What's wrong, Hinata? Did something happen?"

"Chikage-san's funeral... has been canceled."

"Huh...!? Why!?"

"Apparently, the Taisha has come to the decision that Chikage-san cannot be given a funeral service as a hero... so they want a private service at her home rather than with the Taisha..."

"...!?"

Wakaba had not reported Chikage's violent rampage during forestization, but the Taisha had found out.

Chikage had created a scandal in her hometown and had been close to losing her qualifications as hero. And now she had attacked Wakaba. The reason Chikage lost her hero powers immediately prior to death was because the Shinju had forsaken her-- That was what the Taisha had concluded. And apparently, they had decided to dishonorably discharge her as a hero as a result.

"That's ridiculous! That wasn't Chikage's fault, you know!? What gives!?"

"I don't agree with the decision either...! But the Taisha probably doesn't want to defile the sanctity of the 'heroes' as an entity..."

"...!"

"The decision has already been set..."

Wakaba slammed her fist on a desk.

"I am a hero"

That thought resonated with Chikage more than anyone else. It was her source of pride. Her mental pillar of support. And yet that pillar of support had been pulled out from under her dead body.

(That's just cruel...)

Chikage's corpse was handed over to her family. What happened to her afterwards was unknown to Wakaba and the others. The Taisha would not tell them when the funeral service was to be held, nor what sort of service it was to be, leaving the others unable to even mourn for her.

Several days passed--

Yuuna was discharged and returned to the classroom.

"Good morning! Wakaba-chan! Hina-chan!"

Yuuna's first words upon returning to school were used for a hearty greeting.

A greeting refreshing enough to completely blow away the stagnant atmosphere that had been accumulating the past few days Wakaba and Hinata were alone.

"Yuuna, you've been discharged?"

"Yup! Good as new!"

Yuuna made a peace sign.

"That's great. Welcome back, Yuuna-san."

"I'm back! Now where's my welcome hug?"

Yuuna and Hinata hugged each other. Afterwards, Yuuna and Wakaba hugged as well.

"Man, my body's gotten all out of shape from being in the hospital! I wanna get back to training right away, so how about we go at it later, okay, Wakaba-chan?"

Yuuna was so bright, it was unnatural. Perhaps she was trying to force herself to cheer up from the depression Chikage's death had brought.

In that case, Wakaba and Hinata decided to join in.

After all, a false sense of cheerfulness was better than no cheerfulness at all.

"Yeah, count me in, Yuuna! I won't go easy on you just because it's rehab."

"Bring it!"

"In that case, Yuuna-san, let me take a picture to commemorate your recovery-- wait, huh?"

Hinata tried to take a picture with her smartphone, but tilted her head in confusion.

"... Ah, it seems my memory card is full."

Hinata started flipping through memory cards as she piled them up on top of her desk.

"That's a lot!"

Yuuna's eyes widened in surprise.

"Are all of these for pictures...?"

"Yes. Everything starting from Wakaba-chan's baby pictures!"

Hinata proudly boasted.

"Baby pictures? But Hinata, you were a baby then too? Babies don't have smartphones, so how..."

"I've digitized all the photo albums in your house."

"When!?"



Around two thirds of the memory cards were labeled with a month, year, and the name "Wakaba-chan" written in small letters. But the remaining third only had a month and year. And those cards only seemed to start around the year 2015.

"What about these ones without Wakaba-chan's name on them?"

Yuuna picked up one such memory card.

"Those ones have pictures of all of us."

Hinata inserted the card into her smartphone and flipped through the photos one by one.

"Ah! This one's from when we all first came to Marugame Castle! That brings me back!"

Yuuna spoke happily as she looked at the picture on the smartphone.

The photo showed six girls in Marugame Castle, all elementary students.

Six girls who were brought into Marugame Castle not fully grasping the entire extent of the circumstances that brought them there. Everyone looked bewildered. These girls had just met and still had not talked with each other much.

Hinata swiped her phone screen.

The next photo was of the first time they all went out for udon.

"Here. This place is one of the few genuine handmade shops. A rarity even in Kagawa now."

Wakaba and Hinata had taken Yuuna, Tamako, Anzu, and Chikage to a certain udon shop in the city. The four of them were from out of prefecture, so it was the first time they had eaten Kagawa udon.

Yuuna had said she wanted to eat udon, the soul food of Kagawa, so Wakaba and Hinata had taken everyone to their recommended shop. At the time, the heroes' faces had yet to be widespread through the media, so they were able to eat in peace without the other patrons causing a commotion. They merely attracted as much attention as any other large group of six elementary schoolers would.

The four out-of-towners ordered udon as recommended by Wakaba and Hinata, and as soon as they had their first mouthful of noodles, their eyes opened in surprise.

(All four): "...!?"

For a minute, everyone froze as if time had stopped.

The first to speak was Tamako.

"Wh-what!? What on earth is this majesty!? It's a tamashock! This flavor is a 30 kilotamashock!"

Tamako later explained that one tamashock was equal to the surprise you feel when you try to buy a drink at a vending machine, but open your wallet and find you only have 80 yen. Apparently, awakening to her power as a hero was merely a 27 kilotamashock for Tamako.

"Is this... *slurp*... really... *nom nom*... udon...!? It's completely different... *slurp*... from the udon I know... *gulp*, phew~"

Chikage could not hide her trembling as she spoke between bites.

"I-it's delicious!! Even though neither the ingredients nor the broth look like nothing out of the ordinary... Is this really just 350 yen a bowl!? The al dente firmness as you chew, the satisfying feeling as you swallow, the texture, it's all exquisite...! This is Sah-NOO-ki OO-dahn!!"

Yuuna gazed lovingly at the bowl of noodles as she said its name inexplicably with an English-speaking accent.

"The noodles are dancing in my mouth! Indeed, in the same way that the taste of madeleines dipped in tea sent Marcel on a journey to faraway memories of Albertine in 'In Search of Lost Time', one day in the future, I too will be sent on a journey to faraway memories by the taste of this udon...!"

Anzu's comments were becoming quickly unintelligible, but Wakaba and Hinata at least understood that she was deeply moved by the experience.

Tamako ordered two extra helpings while Yuuna ordered one.

After that day, but before the heroes' faces became well known through the media, the girls would all go to local udon shops together every now and then.

"Now that I think about it, that's when we all began to slowly open up to each other."

A nostalgic smile formed on Wakaba's lips.

"It was a real surprise how delicious it was!"

Yuuna spoke excitedly as if she had recalled her surprise at the time.

Hinata smiled.

"It made me proud of my hometown to see it make everyone so happy."

"Yeah. And I guess it was all thanks to Yuuna that we had that opportunity to break the ice. Thanks."

--Let's all go eat udon together!-- Yuuna's suggestion was what caused everyone to go out for udon and get just a little bit closer together.

Ever since then, Yuuna had been the heroes' mood maker.

Yuuna shook her head in embarrassment at Wakaba's words.

"Huh!? I just wanted to try Kagawa udon. It was really just me being a glutton."

"If you're a glutton, then what does that make Tamako?"

Wakaba smiled wryly.



"I know, how about we go visit that shop again soon?"

Hinata suggested happily.

"Mm... but if we go there now, we'd cause a commotion, wouldn't we?"

For good or for bad, the heroes were just too famous now.

"Then how about we go in disguise! I'll go wearing sunglasses!"

"Yuuna-san, you'd still get caught if you just wore sunglasses. I know, I'll do your hair in a different style and pick out a cute outfit for you... Teehee, I've only ever thought about doing this kind of thing for Wakaba-chan, but you've got a lot of potential I can work with too, Yuuna-san..."

"H-Hina-chan? You look kind of scary right now..."

Yuuna's face stiffened.

Afterwards, Hinata swiped her phone screen once more to show more pictures one by one.

Since they went to a school with only six students, they had no big events like sports day or culture festivals.

Even so, Hinata had an extensive photo catalog of the six girls' daily life.

Hinata's phone screen showed a picture of Tamako carrying a sleeping Anzu on her back.

"Oh right... that happened."

"That's when An-chan went missing, huh."

That was another event that occurred quite a while before the Vertexes began invading Shikoku.

One day, Anzu hadn't returned to the dorm even after curfew.

The other girls and the teachers went searching downtown.

Tamako was especially worried, thinking she might have been kidnapped.

"Tama swore to protect Anzu...!"

Tamako continued searching for Anzu, feeling irritated at herself.

Long after the sun had set, Tamako had been the one to find Anzu. She had apparently fallen asleep with a book on her lap after reading.

Tamako carried the sleeping Anzu on her back all the way back to Marugame Castle. Dried tears lined the sleeping Anzu's cheek.

Upon seeing Anzu, the adults' search party dispersed with a sigh of relief. The other girls started heading back to the dormitory as well.

Tamako continued carrying Anzu on her back.

"Anzu, what did you think would happen if a girl like you slept in the park all alone late at night? I'm gonna give you an earful when you wake up."

But Tamako was smiling even as she said that. She was indeed mad at Anzu, but it seemed she was even happier to know that Anzu was safe.

Anzu woke up en route to the dormitory.

"Huh...? Where am I...?"

"Marugame Castle. We're just about back at the dorm."

When Wakaba answered her, Anzu looked around dubiously, still half-asleep.

"Huh...? Oh, I must've fallen asleep reading..."

"Was that the book you were reading?"

Hinata gestured toward the paperback book Anzu was still holding onto.

Even in her sleep, Anzu wouldn't let go of the book. The cover looked quite darker than the romance novels Anzu usually read.

"Yes... Nevil Shute's 'On the Beach'... It's about a post-apocalyptic world where people try to keep living normal lives until the very end. Reading it made me feel sad... but I just couldn't stop reading..."

Perhaps still sleepy, Anzu said just that before closing her eyes once more.

"We'll... be okay... right...? Forever..."

It was hard to tell from Anzu's tone if she were sleepwalking or if she were serious.

"Of course we'll be okay, Anzu! Our world's not post-apocalyptic. We don't have to worry about waiting to the very end. Just leave it to Tama to make sure you and the whole world are safe!"

Anzu's breathing calmed down in response to Tamako's words.

In the end, Tamako carried Anzu all the way back to her room like that.

"... I don't think we shall discover anything that's good, or very hopeful. But even so, it's fun just finding out..."

Wakaba muttered as she gazed at the picture of Tamako carrying Anzu.

"Wakaba-chan, what was that?"

Yuuna asked dubiously.



"Ahh, that's a line from the protagonist of 'On the Beach'... I borrowed it from Anzu after that all happened."

That novel was the sad story of a post-apocalyptic world.

But until the end of the end, people continued their jobs as normal, raised children, did housework, and spent normal days with their family and loved ones--

If the world were not faced with impending collapse, this surely would have been an all too ordinary, happy story.

If only.

If only Wakaba and the other girls lived in a world not faced with impending collapse, they would surely be living ordinary, happy days.

"... Let's look at the next picture!"

And with Yuuna's suggestion, Hinata swiped her screen.

One by one, new pictures showed up.

A picture of everyone by a decorated Christmas tree, from before the Vertexes started appearing again.

"That reminds me... This is around when I started getting along with Gun-chan."

Even after the six of them started living together in Marugame Castle, Chikage still would not open her heard to anyone.

At school, she would play games with headphones on during breaks. During lunch break, she would disappear somewhere, apparently to eat alone. After school, she would immediately head back to her dorm room, speaking with nobody.

Tamako, Yuuna, and the others would try talking to her during break times, but they would get no reaction from Chikage as she was too busy concentrating on her games with her headphones on.

"What's her problem!? We're trying to talk to her! How gloomy can you be!?"

Even as Tamako vented her frustration, Chikage didn't so much as look up from her game screen.

And then one day, near the end of the year, Christmas decorations started popping up downtown.

"We gotta do something Christmas-y too! Together!"

Yuuna declared.

"Christmas...?"

Just then, Chikage paused her game and murmured.



It was a quiet little voice, but since she rarely responded to her classmates at all, everyone turned to Chikage.

Chikage awkwardly looked away and resumed her game, but Yuuna spoke up to her.

"Let's have a Christmas party, Gun-chan!"

"..."

"Okay?"

"... I don't know what Christmas parties are like... My family's... never done anything... for Christmas..."

Those words took Tamako and Anzu by surprise. As the Miko attached with the heroes, Hinata alone was informed of Chikage's past and strained household situation, and thus could see how that might be the case.

"Well, you see, for a Christmas party, you decorate a huuuge tree, eat cake and poultry, wear hats, and go all 'boom!' and stuff!"

"...? I know... what a Christmas tree is... but...? Poultry? ... like honetsuki dori? Boom... so you shoot guns? So... you wear hats while eating honetsuki dori and shooting each other with guns...?"

A scene played out in Chikage's mind with fedora-wearing mafiosos devouring honetsuki dori with one hand, pistol in the other, shooting at each other.

"No, no! You see, there are these things made with gunpowder where you pull the string and they make a super loud sound! And the hats are, well... they're like, triangle shaped like this!"

Yuuna awkwardly tried to describe party poppers and party hats. But Chikage didn't seem to follow.

"Anyway, let's have a Christmas party! Then you'll understand! Okay?"

Yuuna almost overbearingly decided to hold a Christmas party in the Marugame Castle classroom for Chikage to attend.

Since it was a Christmas party organized by young girls, it was not much. They could only prepare a small tree, decorate the classroom, and get a cake and some sweets they scrounged up.

But still, everyone enjoyed themselves quite a bit.

As they prepared for the party, Yuuna stayed by Chikage's side the entire time, and little by little, Chikage started talking with her.

"Takashima-san... I'm not good talking with people... I've always just played games..."

Chikage spoke while decorating the classroom.

"You like games?"

"Yeah... that's all I'm good at, anyway..."

Chikage spoke just a little bit happily.

"I see. Then I'll go buy a game you're playing too. Can we play together?"

"In that case... I'll give you a game... I recommend... with coop play. That way... we can play together..."

"Huh? I can't just take it from you!"

"It's okay... Today's Christmas, right...? I heard... that you give presents... on Christmas."

"Then I'll give you something as a present too, Gun-chan!"

Chikage smiled shyly.

"Okay... thanks. Oh, and... it's 'Koori'... not 'Gun'..."

"Huh, really!?"

"It's... okay, Takashima-san. If it's you... you can call me that."

"So I ended up still calling her Gun-chan after that."

Yuuna looked a just a little bit lonesome as she said that.

"It seemed like Chikage-san liked it when you called her that, Yuuna-san."

Hinata said with a smile as she gazed at the picture.

They looked through some more pictures.

A picture of everyone in the dining hall, right after the Vertexes began invading-- a commemorative photo after the Shikoku heroes' first battle.

"It's already been a year since then, huh..."

Wakaba murmured.

They flipped through more photos and found one of their new years spa trip. Everyone in the hot springs, everyone playing games late at night... irreplaceable moments.

A commemorative photo of before they left Shikoku for their investigation expedition. Tamako and Anzu were so excited the day before that they couldn't sleep. The results of the investigation itself were tragic, but up until right before they left, they were as excited as if they were going on a field trip.

Back then, there were six of them altogether.

But now--



"Hey, Wakaba-chan, Hina-chan. There were six of us, right...?"

Wakaba nodded at those words.

"Yeah... that's correct."

Five heroes and one miko.

"Gun-chan... was there by our side, right...?"

Five heroes. Not four.

"Wakaba-chan, Yuuna-san... Shall we go look for her? Where Chikage-san was buried, and how... So that we can visit her."

Wakaba and the others were told where Tamako and Anzu were buried after their funeral service. They would visit their graves every now and then.

But they were not told what happened to Chikage's body after she was taken to her home. It was as if someone were trying to completely sever Koori Chikage's existence from them.

"Yeah... Let's look for her! I didn't even get to say goodbye to Gun-cha."

Yuuna looked up and made that declaration.

After school, Wakaba, Yuuna, and Hinata went looking for Chikage's whereabouts together. The staff members at the school and hospital the heroes went to obstinately refused to tell them anything.

Perhaps they had been hushed by the Taisha.

Their search quickly reached a deadlock, but Hinata suddenly had an idea.

"I just remembered, Chikage-san's family was moved to Marugame to live with her. If we could find their house, we might be able to ask her family about her."

A Koori family moved to Marugame at the beginning of June-- they should be able to narrow it down with that information. Wakaba, Yuuna, and Hinata split up and began gathering information from residents.

But the person who told them where the house was said this:

--"Nobody lives there anymore."

Chikage's father left one night and never came back. Her mother was taken to some hospital for her Uranophobia. Hinata had heard that Chikage's father had some personality issues. After his daughter had been discharged as a hero, the Taisha had cut him off of support, which perhaps made him abandon everything and run away.



Wakaba, Yuuna, and Hinata tried going to that house, but just as they were told, it was completely empty.

Except for one room Wakaba found-- a room in complete disarray. Furniture, clothes, books, game consoles, a computer... everything was destroyed. The three girls were in shock at the sight. It was as if a tornado had torn through the room.

Judging by the items they found, it was probably Chikage's room.

A gruesome room seemingly reflective of her emotions at the time.

"Maybe... Chikage wrecked this room herself..."

That was the conclusion Wakaba had come to. After all, while everything else in the room had been destroyed, there was just one thing that remained neatly intact.

A piece of paper placed on top of the torn bed was the only thing left untouched in the wreckage.

It was a familiar sheet of paper.

Yuuna picked it up.

"... It's the diploma we all gave Gun-chan together..."

Back when all six of them were together.

"Chikage-san... kept it safe this entire time..."

Hinata spoke in a trembling voice.

Even after she had destroyed everything in her room, Chikage kept this one thing intact.

It was after Wakaba had proposed they do a mock battle in the school for recreation--

Anzu was the one to suggest making a diploma.

Since all six girls used the same classroom, they rarely remembered that they were in different school years. Anzu was perhaps the only one really aware of it, as she spoke in keigo with everyone aside from Tamako. As a result, Anzu was the first to remember that Chikage would've been in her third year of middle school and would thus graduate the next year.

"I call Tamacchi-sempai Tamacchi-sempai, but if you think about it, Chikage-san's the real sempai here!"

"What? Are you calling Tama an impos-tama?"

"No, but... well, yeah, but..."

"Tama's a real sempai, okay!?"

"Tamacchi-sempai, you're really the same age as me!"

That exchange between Tamako and Anzu aside,

Anzu suggested that they should really make the most of the occasion and give Chikage something to commemorate her graduation.

Everyone agreed, and so they went to a local stationery shop to buy formal certificate paper. The five of them composed the content of the text, and Wakaba wrote it as she had the best handwriting.

The winner of the mock battle would hand the diploma to Chikage. If Chikage herself won, then everyone would hand it to her together. That was the plan.

A diploma made by her friends in Marugame Castle.

Definite proof that the girl named Koori Chikage had lived there.

"..."

Yuuna's shoulders shook in silence.

In the end, they had no more footprints to follow to find Chikage.

They were nothing but ordinary girls outside of their "Is a hero" and "Is a miko" status, so they were limited in what they could do.

But while they were unable to find Chikage, the girls made a solemn vow.

One day, the Taisha requested Wakaba once again address the citizens with another speech:

Now that Chikage had passed away, Wakaba and Yuuna were the only heroes capable of fighting. Thus, the citizens needed to be calmed and given peace of mind. Furthermore, they were to be told that Chikage's death was a result of her becoming unsuitable as a hero, and that Wakaba and Yuuna excelled in both ability and mental fortitude, so they would not be defeated by the Vertexes. Thus, Shikoku was safe.

Wakaba stood at Marugame Castle, facing the people once again.

The people came to hear the hero's words.

The media came to broadcast the hero's speech live.

Wakaba had completely memorized the speech the Taisha had prepared, along with the gestures and intonation she was to use. As with the previous speech, it was a carefully formulated speech created by analyzing famous speeches of the past. The speech wove a story with logical progression, decorated with eloquent rhetoric. The gestures and intonation were carefully chosen for psychological effect.

It was a speech whose first and foremost goal was to manipulate the audience's emotions.



Again, like the last time, Wakaba began the speech as instructed by the Taisha.

But she abandoned the script in the middle.

"Koori Chikage was a genuine hero!!

Wakaba cried out.

"It is true that she lost her mental stability! However! With her dying breaths, Chikage protected me! If it were not for Chikage's protection, I would be dead! If sacrificing your life to protect another does not make you a hero, then tell me, what will!? Even if the entire world denies her as a hero, Chikage is a hero to me-- to all her friends-- and we are not afraid to say it! Tamako, Anzu, and Chikage were all heroes... The five of us were all heroes who fought side by side!!"

The TV broadcast cut out midway, but Wakaba continued to cry out from her heart nonetheless.

"You were so cool, Wakaba-chan!"

"Indeed, I was moved too."

After Wakaba's speech ended, Yuuna and Hinata greeted her with a smile

Afterwards, Wakaba, Yuuna, and Hinata all formally urged the Taisha to treat Chikage as a hero.

The decision of how Chikage was to be treated was put temporarily on hold, along with her dishonorable discharge status.

And then in July--

An oracle was passed down foretelling an imminent Vertex invasion.

Countermeasures for the large Vertex currently forming outside the barrier have yet to be found.

Only two heroes remain.

(Chapter 17 END)